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Keeping Tabs on Secret Talks With Iran

For nearly a year, we have been reporting on the secret deals the Reagan administration was making with Iran. We voiced our vehement objections to the secret negotiations, both in this column and in private talks with administration officials.

Because of constant warnings from our sources that detailed reports on the U.S.-Iranian contacts would endanger the lives of American hostages in Lebanon, we were circumspect in outlining the exact nature of the negotiations. Even so, other journalists told us they couldn't confirm the stories, and high administration officials tried their best to persuade us that we were wrong.

But we knew we were right, and we believed that the administration's policy was wrong.

Last January, we disclosed that former high-level officials were conducting secret talks with Iran over the hostages. Now that the cat is out of the bag, we can reveal that two of the negotiators were a one-time Central Intelligence Agency official and a high Defense Department official who were closely associated with renegade CIA ex-agent Edwin Wilson.

On Feb. 24, in an Oval Office interview with President Reagan, Dale Van Atta pursued the story on U.S. contacts with Iran. "This is on Iran," he said, according to a tape recording of the conversation. "For six years they've been waging a terrorist war against us and there are at least 264 American bodies they can count as being responsible for, including, as we reported, [hostage] William Buckley last year, whom they tortured mercilessly. I know there are still four hostages there now and that may preclude you from saying anything."

The president confirmed part of our story, but then made a statement that—on his condition—we will be able to report only after all the hostages are safely home.

After further inquiries, we wrote two columns last April that began to pry the lid off the secret operation. On April 28, we reported that the administration "has been quietly conciliatory in behind-the-scenes negotiations with Iran over the American hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists."

On April 30 we reported that the administration was using covert Israeli shipments of U.S. arms to establish relations with Iran.

We learned that the arms sales were part of secret dealings with Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaker of Iran's parliament. On May 11, we warned:

"[T]he president's advisers should not lose sight of the dubious background of the people they're cozying up to . . . . [They are] dealing with a bunch of cutthroats."

We specifically warned about Rafsanjani, who was implicated in the murder of two American servicemen in Iran in the 1970s. "U.S. officials have pinned a substantial part of their hope on Rafsanjani," we wrote, "and have presumably inspired stories in the press, which referred to him as 'moderate' and credited him with helping to free the American hostages five years ago."

It was Rafsanjani who blew the cover on the secret arms-for-hostages deal.

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